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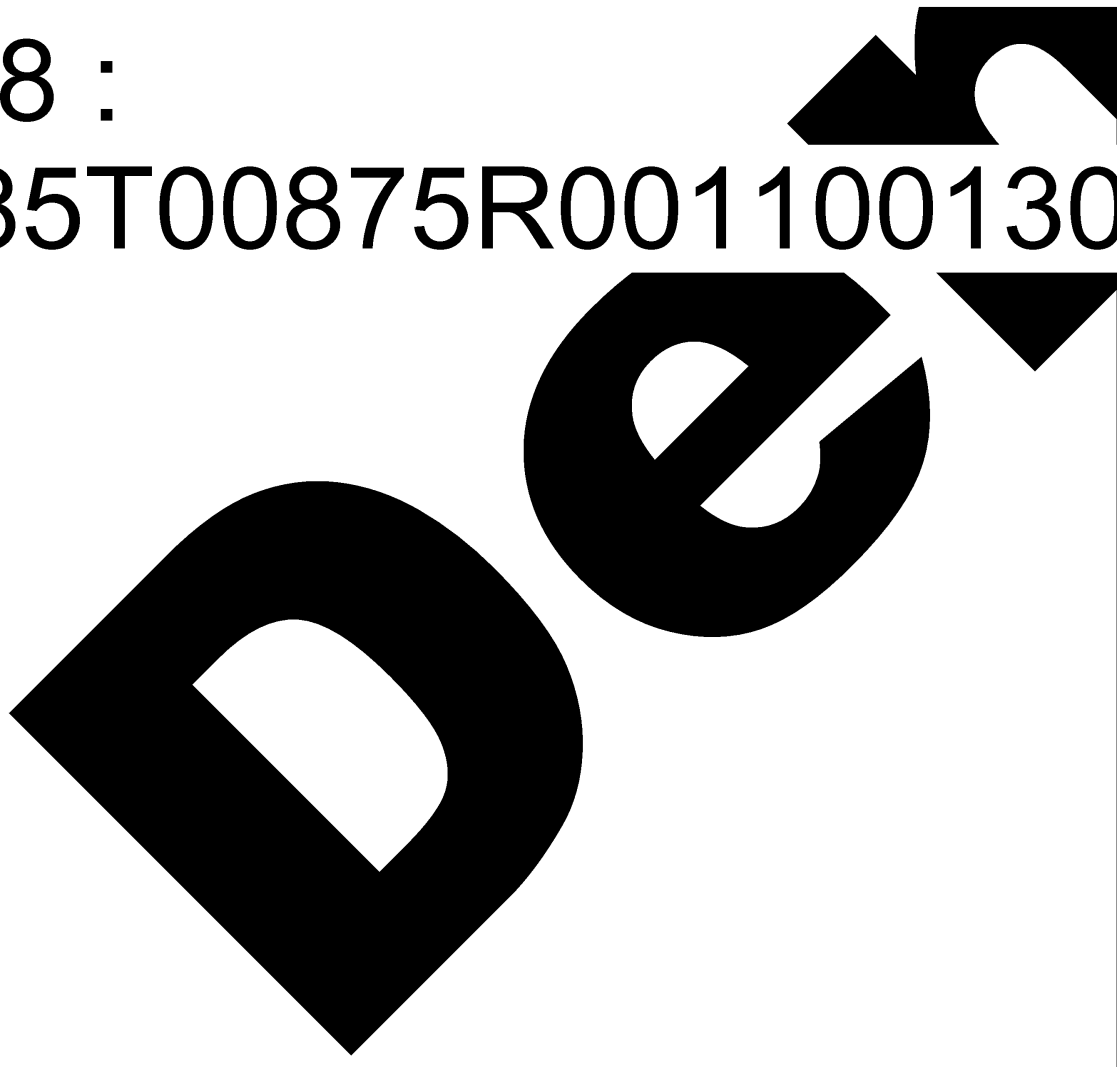

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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

Some Reflections on Mao

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31 January 1972
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
31 January 1972

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Some Reflections on Mao

1. Any assessment of Mao Tse-tung begins with the obvious: he is a charismatic leader who has dominated nearly the entire history of Chinese Communism and who views the Chinese revolution as his own creation. One of the original founders of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, Mao has been its sole chairman since 1935. He has guided all important affairs of state since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. At 78, Mao can look back on a career in which he has been the Chinese Communists' principal ideologist, political organizer, military leader, and government chief. Mao clearly considers himself a world historical figure, both in the Chinese context and in that of the Communist movement, where the Chinese claim that Mao ranks in the pantheon of Communist immortals on a par with Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin.

2. Mao is, in a sense, a philosopher-statesman whose "thought," in his view, embodies the aspirations of the majority of

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the people and provides China with a sure guide to national greatness. But Mao is also a hard-bitten politician constantly preoccupied with military, political, and economic realities not always easily reconciled with the major tenets of his ideology--and with his own political survival as well.

3. For most of his tenure as a revolutionary and national leader, Mao has been able to stay on top and to adapt his vision of what China ought to be to objective circumstances. Since the 1958-60 Great Leap Forward era, the policies with which Mao has been most closely identified have in many ways hindered China's transformation into a modern industrial state, and his own power interests and ideological predilections have often proved a major disunifying factor in Chinese politics. It is therefore possible that many of his ideas may not long survive him. Paradoxically, however, the lives of the Chinese people have been bound up with Mao's revolutionary vision for 22 years, and in a basic sense, no one can really replace him.

Mao's Self-Portrait

4. In his December 1970 interview with American journalist Edgar Snow, Mao characterized himself as essentially a simple man who wished not to be remembered as China's "Great Leader, Great Helmsman" but rather as the "Great Teacher." This self-assessment is less humble than it sounds. By arrogating to himself the title of the nation's "teacher," Mao is asserting that he knows better than any of his compatriots the path China should follow to achieve both the goals of national power and the "Maoist" vision of the good society--a selfless collectivity which will eventually surpass the advanced West without losing egalitarianism and revolutionary elan.

His Political Style

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Mao's talks frequently betrayed a didactic approach and a condescending air. Deliberately, he projected an image of a passionate, slightly humble, earthy, irascible, and shrewd man. As a good "teacher," Mao would often say that his "student-colleagues" could correct him if he were wrong.

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6. Nevertheless, Mao played more than the role of teacher and sometime pupil. His presence was intimidating, and he was a formidable adversary, fighting cleverly and hard. Often he would employ sardonic humor and invective drawing on the strengths and weaknesses, past and present, of his colleagues. On the whole, the record shows Mao as a master of attack, retreat, and counterattack--in effect, a guerrilla strategist--in party debates. In addition to the forcefulness of his personality, Mao used various stratagems: manipulating rivalries among his associates, attacking his enemies when he was politically secure, calling for his comrades to unite in a common cause when he was weak, and even threatening to withdraw from the political system to build a new revolutionary movement.

7. Thus, in inner-party circles Mao brought his will to bear not merely as an elevated "teacher" but as a political antagonist ready to confront his colleagues and to intervene actively in day-to-day decision-making. Although in December 1970 Mao told Snow that he formulates policy guidelines and issues general directives leaving the details of execution to others, it is likely that he still frequently interjects himself into the daily political process and attempts to exercise his personal authority in carrying out given programs.

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The Cult of Mao

8. A further illustration of Mao's personality and his political style is the manner in which he has employed his doctrine--"Mao Tse-tung Thought"--and its attendant personality cult. As Mao has aged, he has been increasingly deified. In his 1970 conversation with Snow, Mao deplored the slogans and other forms of worship carried to excess by the Red Guards. He said there should be a cooling down. But Mao acknowledged that, because a great deal of party power had been out of his control in the early 1960s, he had deliberately fostered the personality cult in order to stimulate the masses to dismantle the "anti-Mao" party bureaucracy. In short, Mao not only uses his personality cult as a device for ensuring his political survival but in effect claims that he does personify the unity and hopes of the nation.

The Maoist Vision

9. Mao's "thought," about which the Chinese speak so often, is a complex thing. Somewhere in the "collected works" is a passage suitable to support any given policy. It is often contradicted by another passage. Certain recurring themes, however, do stand out. In general, Mao sees all social processes in terms of struggle, conflict, and combat. The concept of the law of contradictions--the dialectical struggle between antithetical forces--is one to which he has given special emphasis. Mao sees China as progressing to its rightful place in the world by struggling constantly against its enemies abroad, and progressing toward ideal communism by struggling constantly against enemies within. He seems to feel that progress stops when struggle ends, and he is suspicious of the motives of those who appeal for periods of internal peace and social harmony. Thus, ever since achieving power Mao has attempted--when the traffic would bear--to contrive conditions of tension and struggle in order to create the type of man, preserve the sort of values, and promote the processes that are essential for continuing revolution.

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10. Maoism also lays heavy stress on the crucial role of subjective factors in history, the role of the individual human will as a force capable of reshaping the material, objective environment. This attitude is obviously linked to Mao's guerrilla experience and to his conviction that men, not weapons, are the decisive factor in revolutionary war. Subjective emphasis carries over into Mao's prescriptions for modernizing China and is expressed in his almost mystical faith that China's mobilized masses can transform their world through collective, labor-intensive action. This also happens to be convenient theory for an underdeveloped, over-populated nation unable to motivate its people with substantial material rewards, and Mao implicitly acknowledged as much some years ago when he declared the fact that China was "poor and blank" was a revolutionary virtue.

11. These factors have led Mao to place a high value on ideological motivation--the "spiritual transformation" of men. In Mao's ultimate vision, the good society is one united by something approaching total consensus and marked by radical collectivism. To oversimplify, men will be "freer" because they have submerged their individual selfishness in a kind of mystical collectivism. To achieve this internalized consensus, however, blind obedience is not enough. Instead, the spiritual transformation of the entire Chinese people is to take place through the study of Mao's works, thought reform, and education through labor.

12. This emphasis on spiritual transformation is closely linked to a populist theme in Mao's "thought." For him, the masses of peasants and workers are the repository of the wisdom and ingenuity which will enable China to forge ahead in its economic and technical development without heavy reliance on specialists steeped in foreign knowledge and foreign theories (concessions being made in the fields of nuclear technology and advanced weaponry). In fact, in Mao's "thought" there is a definite anti-intellectual bias and a fear that a bureaucratic and

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technical elite will undermine his populist revolution. This element of his vision was a major factor in Mao's effort during the Cultural Revolution to undo bureaucratic stratification by destroying respect for the special status of the party member or the special knowledge of the expert. The Cultural Revolution was a failure from most points of view, but Mao does not discourage easily and it may happen again.

13. Although Mao's emotional commitment to the idea of continuing revolution is strong, he realizes that everything is not possible at a given time and that one must therefore distinguish between stages. Although he may find it increasingly distasteful as he grows older, Mao has certainly been known to compromise in both domestic and foreign policy when he finds it in his interest to do so. His imprimatur on the recent developments in Sino-US relations, for example, shows that he can subordinate ideological considerations to the need for a flexible diplomatic posture, in hopes of turning China's weakness into a strength in the triangular Sino-Soviet-US relationship. There is also no sign that Mao has lost his philosophic capacity to take the long view of China's destiny. His sardonic comment to Premier Kosygin in 1969 that Sino-Soviet polemics would be carried on for 10,000 years if necessary conveys Mao's sense that history will favor China, that "good" will triumph over "evil."

Mao's Current Role

14. Mao remains the dominant political figure in Peking. Major changes in policy and personnel assignments require his approval, and no individual leader or combination of leaders appears able, or anxious, to overthrow him. But this is not the whole story. We now know, for example, that Mao's control over party affairs was seriously weakened in the early 1960s, and that he felt threatened prior to the Cultural Revolution because other leaders began to doubt the validity of his prescription for building a selfless and classless China.

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15. Mao launched the Cultural Revolution to remove his dissident "revisionist" colleagues from power in the party, government, and military. In the process, he undermined the authority of the party, set himself above the party as the incarnation of the will of the Chinese people, and came to rely on a small personal entourage of radical advisers.

16. Mao's victory over his opponents was significant but far from complete. He intimated as much to Edgar Snow in December 1970 in acknowledging that the Cultural Revolution still continued in the form of the struggle for power at the national level. The struggle had been dramatically illustrated only a few months earlier by the purge of one of Mao's closest advisers, the radical Chen Po-ta. At the same time, Mao also indirectly admitted that he had serious reservations about the success of the Cultural Revolution, particularly as it applied to the upper levels of the bureaucracy. This odd refusal to claim success suggests that Mao may feel that not all of those holding the principal levers of power in the country today are entirely responsive to him.

17. The general failure of the Cultural Revolution has been underscored by the upheavals in China's leadership since the "revolution" was formally declared to be over at the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969. A considerable amount of maneuvering and purging has occurred within the 25-member politburo formed at that congress. About 11 members seem to have been shunted aside, although a few of these may eventually resurface. Some of the purges have involved relatively moderate civilian and military figures who were on record as opposing Maoist excesses in the Cultural Revolution, and their political demise may well have been instigated by Mao. But other victims, including Mao's chosen successor, Defense Minister Lin Piao, were in a broad sense members of Mao's entourage. It is possible that Mao--who has consistently recognized the necessity of periods of consolidation after upsurges of radical change--decided to sacrifice his

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closest colleagues because their usefulness to him was over. Nevertheless, the downfall of these men has diminished Mao's prestige and may increase his own vulnerability to a later attack.

18. In short, Mao--for all his deification--is a political animal working amid shifting political sands to enhance his own power and make his will felt. For example, following the Cultural Revolution, Mao attempted to ensure his supremacy by rewriting China's party and state constitutions. Both the party constitution approved at the Ninth Congress in 1969 and a draft state constitution drawn up in 1970 specified Mao's role as the personal ruler of the nation and, for the first time in any Communist constitution, named his successor. The latter provision, by denying the party its right to choose the next chairman, provided the ultimate proof of Mao's contempt for the party.

19. Events since the drafting of the two new constitutions, however, suggest that there has been strong resistance to Mao's hostility to the party. The draft state constitution has not yet been approved, Mao's personal heir has been purged, and there is strong sentiment in Peking for some formula for a "collective leadership" as the best device for handling the succession to Mao and, at least implicitly, for restoring the legitimacy of the party.

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20. The present drive to restore the party organization is almost certainly in part designed to reduce the excessive authority which the military acquired in civil administration as a result of the Cultural Revolution. As such, it may well have Mao's personal endorsement. He is, in fact, on record as early as 1967 in favor of a properly revitalized civilian party as a political instrument. Nevertheless, the current propaganda emphasis on the party does not depict it merely as an instrument of Mao's will.

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21. Even if it is assumed that Mao is not an all-powerful autocrat, we believe it would be a serious mistake to deny that he is still the man who makes the ultimate decisions in all key areas of China's domestic and foreign policy. Chou En-lai may be the chief architect of present Chinese policy toward the US, but his blueprint must have Mao's approval. Mao is a consummate politician who, if unable to have his way in all matters, is still able to retain considerable leverage by playing off opposing groups against one another. Indeed, much of the leadership uncertainty in Peking today may stem from Mao's devotion to this tactic, which avoids the risks of provoking any direct challenge to his preeminence.

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